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SUBJECT: IRAQI SHIA PARTIES NOT EMBRACING SADR

Classified by POLCouns Robert Ford, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Some angry remarks at the National Conference notwithstanding, it appears that the Shia establishment is not rallying behind Muqtada al-Sadr in his standoff against the Iraqi Government. Late on the night of August 14, PolCouns spoke to a top aide to Iraqi Government Vice President and Da'wa Party leader Ibrahim Jaaferi. The aide stated that Da'wa would not boycott the National Conference under any circumstance. According to the aide, Jaaferi stood by his call for a peaceful solution to the battle in Najaf. Jaaferi understands that the Mahdi militia must disarm and the city be returned entirely to Government control. Jaaferi recognizes the danger of making concessions to militias nationwide and the need to reestablish law and order. Jaaferi's aide urged the U.S. to stay engaged in helping to restore stability in Iraq and assisting the country's political development.

12. (C) Meanwhile, a key Government minister from another major Shia establishment party, the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), told the Ambassador on August 14 that the National Conference must succeed. Finance Minister Adil Abdul Mahdi said the Government made a mistake in opening negotiations with Sadr and that, if Sadr disavows violence and agrees to play a constructive role, military operations against him should recommence.

13. (C) PolCouns spoke on the evening of August 14 with Radwan Abbas, the custodian of Najaf's Imam Ali mosque who fled Najaf four months ago and is now in Baghdad. Abbas assured PolCouns that the Najaf cleric establishment (Hawza) supports IIG and Coalition efforts to remove the Mahdi militia from Najaf/Kufa and the religious sites. He said many clerics had to flee Najaf for their safety and many had come to Baghdad. Abbas discounted the likelihood of public criticism from the Hawza if the Iraqi Government sends in forces to free the mosque from Sadr forces. He pointed to the silence of late from the Hawza and quoted an Arabic proverb meaning that silence is a sign of consent. (He urged that we not send Coalition forces into the mosque, however.)

14. (C) On the morning of August 15, delegates from these Shia parties attended the Conference in large numbers. A top SCIRI official in troubled Basra told the Regional Embassy Office on August 14 that he would attend the Conference as planned. PolOffs at the Conference reported that there would be some speeches in support of a peaceful solution to the conflict in Najaf. Post has also seen reports of a brief demonstration by Shia attendees of the National Conference demanding peace in Najaf. The protest reportedly ended quickly and the Conference continued. There was also apparently some discussion of the Conference organizing a mission to go to Najaf directly to help facilitate a negotiated end to the standoff. It was not clear if, in fact, such a team would actually go to Najaf.

15. (C) COMMENT: Publicly expressed concerns about Najaf notwithstanding, the two main Shia political parties are not rushing to help Sadr (their potential political competitor). Instead, Dawa and SCIRI are holding fast to

the political process launched by the Government, symbolized now by the National Conference. The lack of criticism against the Government or the Coalition from the Najaf Hawza, combined with the prospect of making inroads into the National Council through participation in the ongoing National Conference, give those parties incentive to continue staying with the Government. The crowds gathering at the Imam Ali mosque make good TV images, but Post does not yet sense that Sadr is gaining any traction with the Shia establishment.

Negroponte